

ENTOMOLOGICAL RAMBLINGS IN MEXICO

By HENRY F. HOWDEN¹

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to describe a few localities in Mexico, visited between 1958 and 1964, which I found interesting entomologically, and to give road information and some details on lodging for the areas mentioned. In many areas changes can be rapid, often showing improvement on the main routes and deterioration in less traveled areas. In general, the American Automobile Association catalog on Mexico and Central America is reliable, and hence I have omitted lodging information in most cases when it is included in the book. Camping is difficult in most areas and there are no established campsites. In central and southern Mexico camps should be guarded as there is a distinct tendency for unwatched items to disappear. For anyone collecting off of the major tourist routes, a smattering of Spanish is desirable and in some places essential.

Since a meaningful description of the biotic areas would be lengthy because of the extremely varied topography, I recommend the discussion of the biota in the book by Leopold (1959). Goldman's (1951) description of his collecting from 1892 to 1906 is also worth reading, if for nothing else than to compare some of the habitats described with their condition today.

If any general statement can be made concerning insect collecting in Mexico, it is that the best collecting comes with the advent of the spring rains. These begin as early as April on the eastern escarpment, in late June in the central plateau and in the western mountain ranges, and in mid-July on the west coast. The varied topography is advantageous; if collecting is poor in one area, one can often move 30 or 40 miles and find better conditions.

MONTERREY TO LINARES

This is the old "main" route (Rt. 85) to Mexico City; there are a number of good places to stay but really modern motels are scarce. Most are 10 or more years old and few, even in the lowlands, are air-conditioned. The road is in fair condition, but is not "fast."

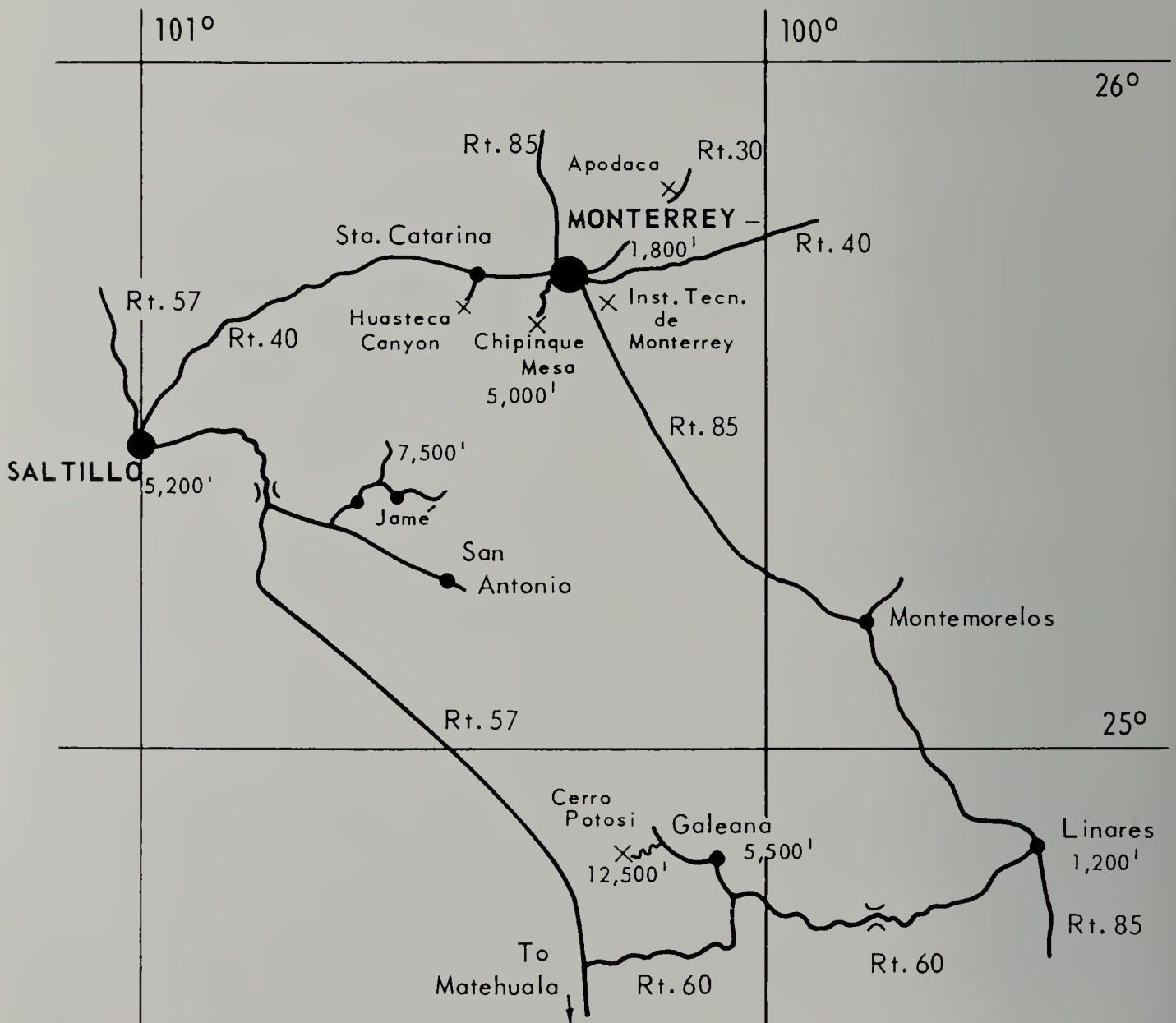
Monterrey, Nuevo Leon (1800 ft.), is a good base (Map 1). It is one of the larger cities in Mexico and has many modern stores. On the south side of the city is the Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey, with an active group of entomologists and botanists headed by Dr. D. Enkerlin. Just across the street from the Instituto is a modern supermarket and 5 miles south on Rt. 85 is the Motel Siesta. This is an excellent motel for families—kitchenettes, two swimming pools, and good, safe drinking water. The motel grounds cover 6 acres and there is good

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thorn-scrub all around, with excellent collecting. From the southwest edge of Monterrey a paved toll road goes up the mountain to 5000 feet, ending at Chipinque Mesa. This area has many species of oak and pine, elements of the southeastern forest (for example, red bud), and the insect fauna is rich and varied. It represents the northern limit for many of the mesic forest insects (both genera and species). One can hire burros on the mesa and reach approximately 8000 feet in several hours if one can stand the ride! In the low country within a 20 mile radius of Monterrey, there are many varied desert habitats. The Instituto has a desert experiment station on Rt. 30 northeast of Monterrey, near the town of Apodaca, and entomologists are welcome. Collecting in the desert area is best in April and September, but it is good on the Chipinque Mesa and in El Diente Canyon (behind the Siesta Motel) most of the summer.

LINARES TO SALTILLO

The road south to Linares (Rt. 85) traverses mostly desert thorn-scrub country. At Linares a new, very good paved road (Rt. 60) goes west



MAP 1. Vicinity of Monterrey, Nuevo Leon.

to Galeana (Map 1) and to the Central Highway (Rt. 57). The highway passes just south of Galeana. If one takes the road to Galeana and then west to Cerro Potosi, one of the highest mountains in Nuevo Leon (12,500 ft.), it is possible to drive up the mountain to 10,300 feet on a good gravel road (any car could make it—at least in 1963) where it ends at a telephone microwave tower. At this altitude there is a beautiful pine forest and areas of “alpine type” meadows. Here it is possible to camp (no houses and only a few people tending cattle). The peak is isolated and the fauna seemed almost insular and depauperate, but very interesting. After returning to Rt. 60 from Galeana, if one goes westward and then north on Rt. 57, the road traverses several interesting arid areas. Almost 24 miles south of Saltillo, Coahuila, a paved road goes in an easterly direction to the town of San Antonio (Map 1). (The road is unmarked, but was the only paved road in 1963 leaving the main highway between Rt. 60 and the mountain pass, 18 miles southeast of Saltillo). Follow the San Antonio road for approximately 11 miles, then turn north on a good dirt road which eventually reaches the village of Jamé. The area around Jamé ranges in elevation from 7000 to 9000 feet and contains a great variety of pine-oak habitats. Many of the beetles collected in the area were closely related or identical with species occurring in southeastern Arizona. Good camp spots are frequent, but food and water should be brought in. The area is easily accessible from Saltillo (1 hour drive), and several motels and a supermarket make Saltillo a good base.

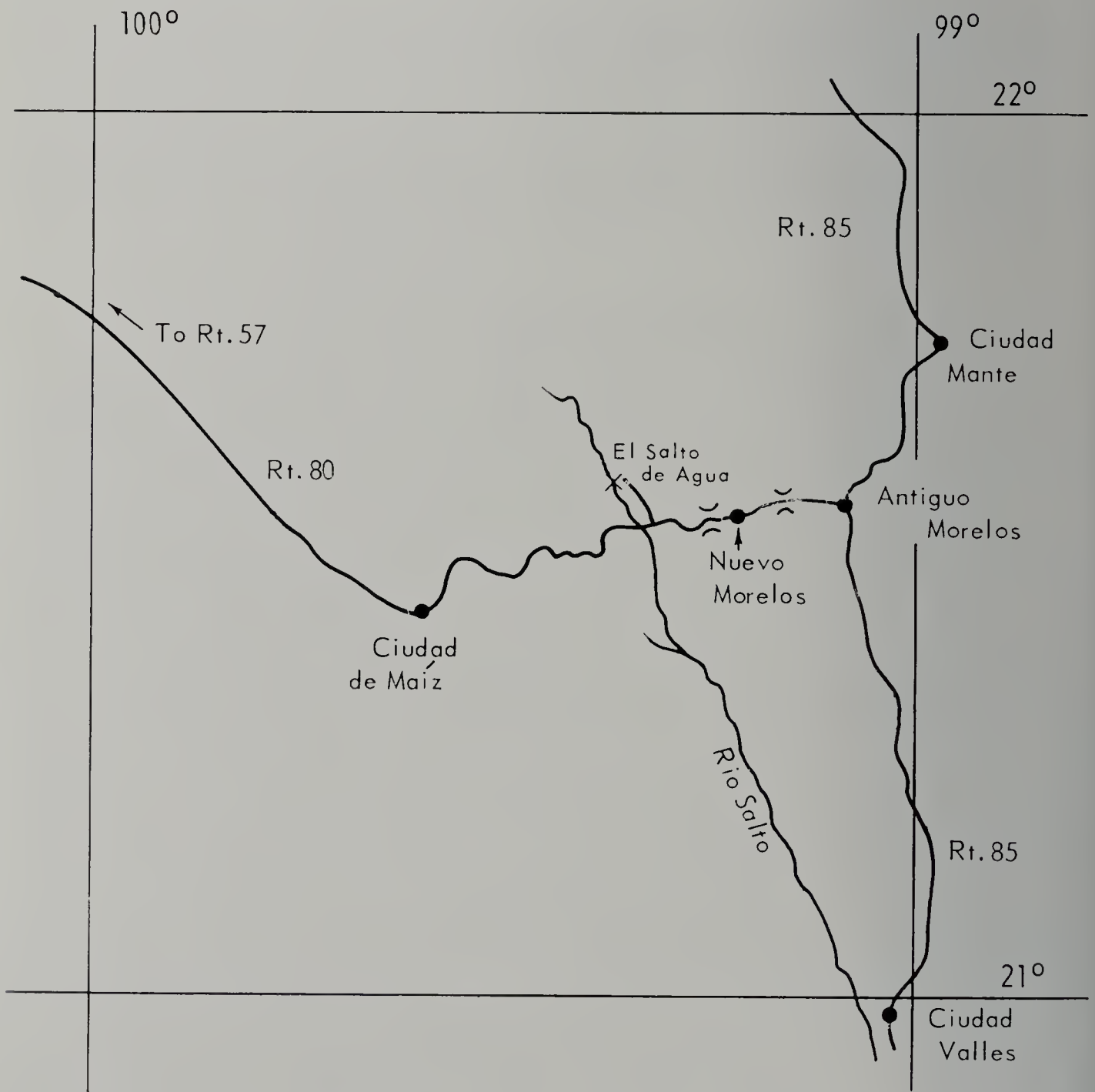
LINARES TO MEXICO CITY

If one goes south from Linares on Rt. 85 instead of turning off to Galeana, one continues through lowland thorn forest which is occasionally broken by wet valleys with larger trees (cypress along the rivers, etc.). Near Ciudad Mante, Tamaulipas (several motels here), is a large sugar cane area, and tropical elements begin. One can turn on to Rt. 80 at Antiguo Morelos (Map 2). After a drive westward of about 22 miles over two low ranges, turn right onto a dirt road which goes north seven miles to El Salto de Agua, San Luis Potosí. El Salto is a large, beautiful waterfall, the spray from the fall supporting lush tropical vegetation (a hydro-electric development may change this). One can camp near the falls or use a small native motel there (food and water should be carried in). The area represents the approximate northern limit for many tropical forms, and collecting is good at almost any time of the year. From El Salto it is an easy drive on Rts. 80 and 57 to San Luis Potosí (desert with the season good in July and August) or on Rt. 85 to Tamazunchale. The latter is in a valley at the base of the Sierra Madre Oriental and has a distinctly tropical fauna and flora. The Hotel San Antonio is best, and the owners are helpful in directing one to nearby ranches. Continuing south on Rt. 85 one reaches Jacala (a scrub pine-oak area) after 3 or more hours of tortuous mountain driving. Simpson's Motel in Jacala was a good base (1960) for collecting in the surrounding mountains. From Jacala it is a full day's drive to Mexico City, where one has a choice of many types of lodging.

EAST OF MEXICO CITY

East of Mexico City are many interesting areas. A good base with much of archeological interest can be found at Tehuacán in a deep desert valley. Teziutlán at the eastern edge of the mountains had one of the few remnants of easily accessible cloud forest. The city of Veracruz on the lowland coastal plain has large sandy areas south of the city. The first two cities mentioned each have one small hotel while Veracruz has a number of acceptable old hotels. Each is approximately one day's drive from Mexico City.

San Andres Tuxtla is an easy day's drive south of the city of Veracruz on Rt. 180. There is a ferry crossing at Alvarado that may cause some delay. At Catemaco one can turn left on a dirt road by the school and drive around the north side of Lake Catemaco. About 3.5 miles from the town is the Hotel Playa Azul, which provides good accommodation



MAP 2. Vicinity of El Salto de Agua, San Luis Potosí.

including separate cabins if desired. The lake is surrounded by an old volcanic rim and large tracts of tropical rain forest. The area represents the northern limits of many Central American species, including howler monkeys. Collecting is good most of the year and it would take a protracted visit to do a good job of collecting in the area.

SOUTH AND WEST OF MEXICO CITY

A day's drive south of Mexico City will take you to Acapulco (expensive!) or Oaxaca. If going to the Acapulco area, Chilpancingo makes a good base with two fairly good (in 1961) hotels. From there one can collect in the unusual Rio Balsas thorn forest, the high country near Chilpancingo, or the coastal area at Acapulco. The fauna of the area is varied and contains many endemics.

Toluca is two hours' drive west of Mexico City on Rt. 15. The road goes through some beautiful stands of pine and fir before leveling out into the high grassland surrounding Toluca. The Hotel Rex (45 pesos for two in 1958) in the center of the city offered good accommodations and a fair restaurant, but cars had to be put in a garage four blocks away. West of Toluca on Rt. 15 are the high pine forests of Michoacan. Lodging can be found at Morelia, Patzcuaro, Uruapan and Zamora, but in some cases the lodging is expensive. Continuing north on Rt. 15, Guadalajara and Tepic have excellent places to stay, but the country surrounding both cities has been badly cut over. However, some good pine areas can be reached from Guadalajara (near Tequila), and some of the side roads near Tepic are well worth exploring.

NORTH OF MEXICO CITY—RT. 57

Near Queretaro and northward to the United States border, the central plateau is either grassland or desert thorn-scrub, with the topography fragmented by numerous small mountain ranges. Both major routes (45 and 57) traverse largely desert regions where collecting is best in July and August. Rt. 57 is the major tourist route to Mexico City and offers the more modern accommodations. Queretaro has at least one modern motel on the new highway on the west side of the city. San Luis Potosí, approximately 100 miles north of Queretaro on Rt. 57, has several new (1959) motels near the main road junction. The surrounding country has a variety of desert vegetation and is seemingly near the southern limit of mesquite on the central plateau.

Matehuala is the next town north of San Luis Potosí offering modern accommodations. A large modern motel (1958) just north of town appeared to be an excellent base for desert collecting, as areas of grassland, mesquite, acacia, yucca, and creosote bush were within a few miles. Saltillo, which has already been mentioned (Map 1), is the next sizeable city north of Matehuala.

NORTH OF MEXICO CITY—RT. 45

The cities on the western side of the central plateau, Aguascalientes, Zacatecas, Durango, Hidalgo de Parral, and Chihuahua, all have some good accommodations, but motels are not numerous. Route 45 is not a main tourist route, and even in a city of the size of Durango there are only two places listed by the American Automobile Association. The country near Aguascalientes and Zacatecas has been so intensively farmed and grazed that general collecting is difficult. Durango makes a better base (Campo Mexico Court), and collecting to the west of the city on Rt. 40 is good. The roads between Durango and Chihuahua, either via Torreón or via Hidalgo de Parral, traverse a number of desert habitats, with the area near Rodeo, Durango, on Rt. 45 having a rich desert flora. A variety of habitats can be reached from Chihuahua, the first city with accommodations (Santa Rita Motel) south of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez. Twenty-two miles north of Chihuahua on Rt. 45 a dirt road runs westward 20 miles to the Majalca national forest, composed mainly of oak and pinyon pine. The road reaches an elevation of 7000 feet and a passenger car can usually make it! Between Chihuahua and El Paso near Villa Ahumada is an interesting and extensive sand dune area, reminding one of White Sands, New Mexico. The fauna is scanty but interesting, some Scarabaeidae at least being endemic to the area.

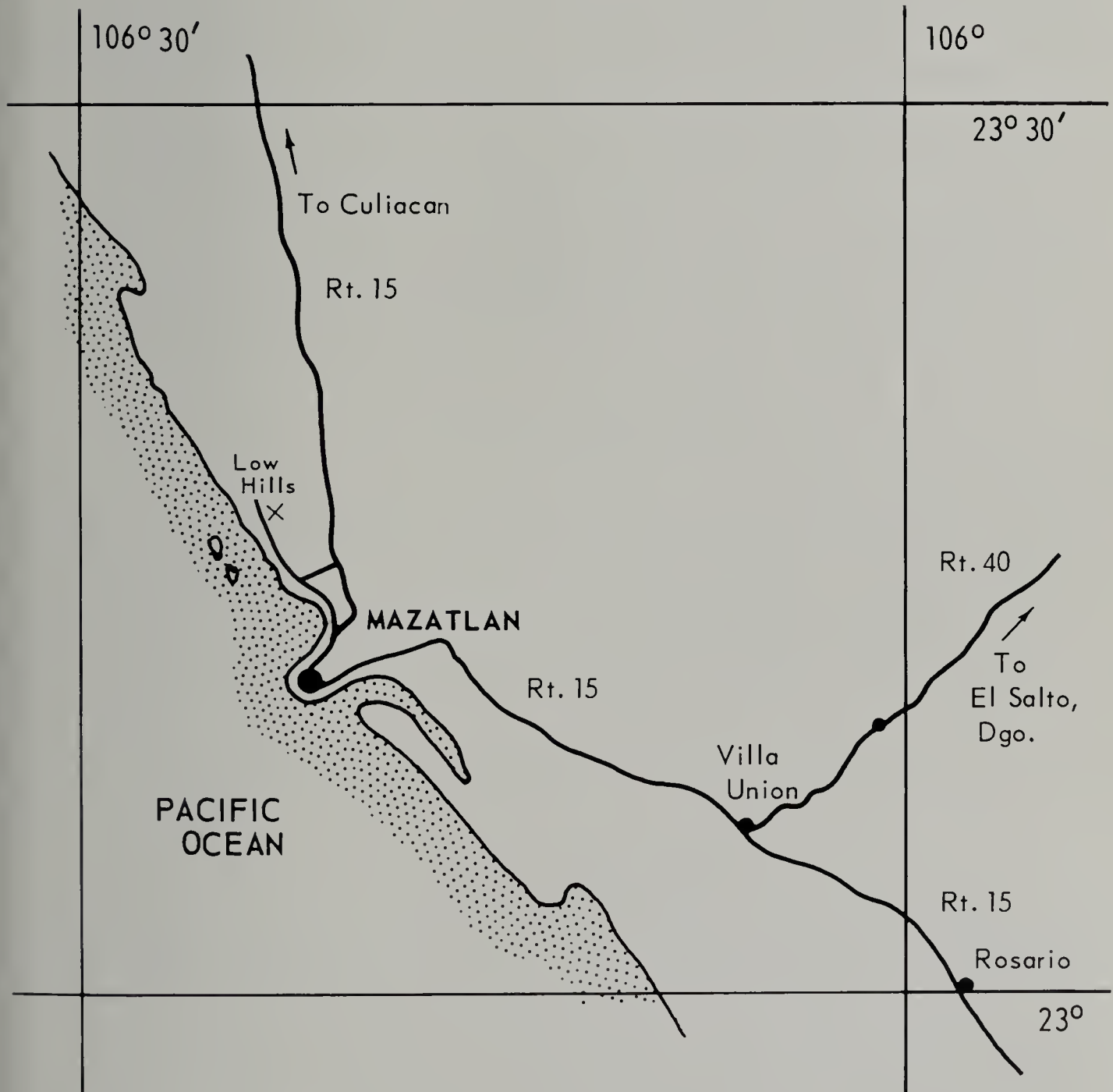
THE WEST COAST, TEPIC TO MAZATLÁN

Just north of Tepic, Rt. 46 (the route signs are often lacking) runs from Rt. 15 to the town of San Blas on the coast. Several hotels (of dubious quality) are in or near the town. Nearby are thick groves of palm, fig, and mangrove, and collecting can be excellent in July. On Rt. 15 north of San Blas much of the land is cut-over thorn-scrub. Near Mazatlán (Map 3) some good areas of the Sinaloan thorn forest still exist. On the north side of Mazatlán there are a number of good (but relatively expensive) motels and hotels along a beautiful sand beach (the Motel Sands at \$8.00 for two people was good in 1964). North of most of the motels there is a traffic circle and Rt. 15 turns sharply inland. If one continues along the coast north of the traffic circle, first on a paved, then on a dirt road for five miles, several low hills can be seen to the right. A dirt road leads to a small quarry at the base of the first hill. Several dirt roads radiate from the quarry through the thorn-scrub. In mid-July, 1964, ten days after the first heavy rain, nearly 100 species of Cerambycidae were collected near the base of the hill in a five day period. Other groups showed nearly as much diversity, but by early August the number of species active in the area was appreciably reduced.

MAZATLÁN TO DURANGO

At Villa Union, 17 miles south of Mazatlán on Rt. 15, Rt. 40 extends eastward to the city of Durango (a full day's drive). For the first 30 miles the road winds through dense thorn forest. The road then starts

to climb and becomes extremely sinuous (hairpin curves!). Eight miles west of El Palmito, near the state line of Sinaloa and Durango, there are several "pull-offs" where one can camp (there are only three or four places where this is possible in 60 or more miles of the road) at an elevation of approximately 6000 feet. Mixed pine-oak forest extends from this area to within 25 miles of the city of Durango. East of El Palmito the road continues upward through some of the most spectacular scenery in Mexico. After some 700 sharp curves the top of the escarpment is reached at Buenos Aires (approximately 9000 ft.). Between Buenos Aires and El Salto (altitude varying from 8000 to 9000 ft.) there are many possible campsites. The best one is 10 miles west of El Salto, just east of Las Adjuntas. Rt. 40 at Km. 1080 crosses an abandoned railroad bed which is now used as a road. Turn north onto the road bed and after 100 yards turn north again into a small pine grove which is a good campsite. There are some good springs at the base of a steep hill across a large meadow.



MAP. 3. Vicinity of Mazatlán, Sinaloa.

The road bed stays firm, even in the rainy season. The climate is cool, 75° being the highest temperature recorded for the summer of 1964. However, the insects came in numbers to a blacklight at temperatures of 50°, and there was often more insect activity on rainy nights than on dry ones! From El Salto (some food and gas can be obtained here) it is a two and a half hour drive to the City of Durango (first good lodgings after leaving Mazatlán).

MAZATLÁN TO NOGALES

North of Mazatlán the size and density of the thorn forest is gradually reduced. Ciudad Obregón, approximately a nine hour drive from Mazatlán on Rt. 15, lies in the middle of the Sonoran desert and makes an excellent base. There are several good dirt roads leading to the coast (directions need to be obtained locally as the roads are unmarked and frequently changed) as well as several good collecting spots along the Rio Yaqui, particularly along the road leading to the Obregón dam (turnoff at Esperanza just north of Cd. Obregón). If one follows the Obregón dam road for approximately seven miles it is possible to turn right and follow a fairly good dirt road to the foothills of the Sierra Madre. In this area there are many good collecting spots and campsites are not difficult to find. North of Ciudad Obregón, Guaymas and Hermosillo have good accommodations, and the road passes through country similar to areas in southwestern Arizona. However, some of the fauna, at least around Hermosillo, does not extend into Arizona, and in a few instances shows a distinct relationship with the fauna of central Baja California.

LITERATURE CITED

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BEETLE TALK

The following proposals concerning the scientific names of beetles were placed before the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature.

Crioceris sexpunctata Fabricius, 1792 (Insecta, Coleoptera): Proposed rejection as a *nomen oblitum*. R. F. Smith, 1965, *Bull. Zool. Nomenclature* 22(4):246.

Xyleborus Bowdich, 1825 (Insecta, Coleoptera): Proposed suppression under the plenary powers. R. T. Thompson, 1965, *Bull. Zool. Nomenclature* 22(4):269.